

## Why Well-Being, Why Now?: Tracing an Alternate Genealogy of Emotion in Composition



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**Abstract:** This article critically analyzes under-acknowledged influences on the recent turn toward emotions, happiness, and well-being in higher education generally and in writing studies specifically: positive psychology (the science of happiness) and positive education (teaching well-being). I provide an overview of their primary features and complicate their assumptions, values, and goals. I also highlight their overlap with and implications for writing studies, including connections and shared concepts between writing and well-being, the central role of writing in positive psychology and positive education pedagogies, and the potential for writing studies to critique and influence well-being education. I argue that embracing emotion as a key component of our pedagogy and scholarship introduces ideological commitments that may challenge and even undermine our personal and professional beliefs. Positive psychology and positive education deserve our sustained attention, and any consideration about emotions in composition will need to confront these movements' influential version of teaching well-being.

Positive psychology, the influential "science of happiness," researches well-being and strives to increase it at individual and societal levels. Recently, it has been applied as "positive education," which brings positive psychology research and practices to classrooms, schools, and curricula to teach flourishing on a global scale. The research, rhetoric, and pedagogy of these movements have contributed to a surging interest in emotions, well-being, and happiness in educational settings, raising awareness of factors beyond the intellectual domain that has traditionally been the focus of academic achievement. Positive psychology and positive education have also captured the interests of policy makers, institutions, administrators, teachers, and students, creating a hospitable climate for integrating emotion, well-being, and education.

Our field's attention to how emotions can be leveraged to produce better writing, pedagogy, and scholarship is happening in parallel with these efforts to institutionalize well-being in educational contexts. Tracing points of intersection with the discourses of positive psychology and positive education uncovers an oft-overlooked antecedent and potential trajectory for the presence of emotions in writing studies. More significantly, foregrounding positive psychology and positive education here allows for "analyses of the institutional structures that circumscribe our activities as teachers and administrators" (Jacobs and Micciche 6). Positive psychology's prominence in both popular culture and educational discourses suggests its methods, tools, and values may begin to trickle into writing classrooms and research. First-year writing (FYW) may be a particularly vulnerable site due to its traditionally service role in the institution. It often acts as handmaid of others' interests, acclimating and normalizing students to both academic writing conventions and college life, and playing a key role in interdisciplinary curricula. Furthermore, in an age of budget cuts, austerity measures, commodification of education, and accountability, teaching for well-being is buoyed by the persistent notion of crisis in education and the cures promised in response. Although it is one of the most visible generators of the rhetoric of emotions in education, this influence remains largely invisible, untheorized, and unengaged by those in writing studies.<sup>{1}</sup>

This article addresses this problem by highlighting another interdisciplinary, contemporary context for our field's recent focus on emotion. Below, I provide an overview of positive education (and its parent, positive psychology), whose advocates view well-being as a desirable educational objective and attempt to align pedagogy, curricula, and policies with positive psychology research findings on happiness and subjective well-being. I complicate the

assumptions, values, and goals behind this push to teach well-being, demonstrating its affinity for conservative agendas. I also highlight their overlap with and implications for writing studies, including the long-established connections between writing and well-being, shared concepts across both fields, the central role of writing in positive psychology and positive education pedagogies, and the potential for writing studies to critique and influence well-being education. I argue that embracing emotion as a key component of our pedagogy and scholarship may introduce a set of ideological commitments opposed to our own values and goals as writing educators. This potential raises pedagogical and ethical questions about this work and, by extension, the connections between writing and well-being as articulated and operationalized in positive psychology and positive education frameworks.

## Teaching Well-Being in Schools: Positive Psychology and Positive Education

Positive psychology emerged at the end of the twentieth century with a focus on increasing happiness, well-being, and flourishing through positive interventions. It has quickly become an influential stakeholder in what type of well-being is valued and maximized in political, socioeconomic, and educational contexts. According to the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, directed by Martin Seligman, one of the founders of the field, positive psychology is “the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive.” From the outset, positive psychology has been conceived of as benefitting individuals as well as societies and has had “three central concerns: positive experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions.” In the quest to cultivate greater flourishing, positive psychologists view well-being as a construct, PERMA: **P**ositive Emotion, **E**ngagement, (positive) **R**elationships, **M**eaning, **A**ccomplishment (*Flourish* 16-20). PERMA lends itself to educational contexts, particularly “accomplishment,” which is closely tied to mastery, success, and the controversial notion of grit.

Positive education has quickly become one of the most influential and ambitious arms of the positive psychology agenda, with positive psychologists and educators converging in a shared interest in well-being, flourishing, and happiness as central aims of education and pedagogy. Seligman clearly states this goal: “I want a revolution in world education. ... we can now teach the skills of well-being—of how to have more positive emotion, more meaning, better relationships, and more positive accomplishment. Schools at every level should teach these skills” (*Flourish* 63). The proposition that schools should teach well-being relies on the related claims that well-being can be taught and that it has an appropriate and desirable place in curricula and educational policy. The International Positive Education Network (IPEN) reiterates this commitment in its vision for positive education: “We want to create a flourishing society where everyone is able to fulfill their potential and achieve both success and wellbeing. Every institution in society has a moral obligation to promote human flourishing, and none more so than those responsible for educating young people - families, schools and colleges” (“Our Manifesto”). Advocates of positive education position it as a “moral obligation,” treating it as an unquestionably positive development and a goal that we, as educators and human beings, should all share.

Positive education claims a transformational approach to student engagement, success, and well-being. Although the purview of schooling is traditionally viewed as academic competencies, positive education emphasizes soft skills, social and emotional literacy, characters, strengths, and values. Positive educators argue that for students to succeed, “intellectual resources will not be enough; they will also need substantial resources of optimism, collaboration, creativity, emotional intelligence, motivation, and relational skills” (Yeager, Fisher, and Shearon 22). IPEN aims to extend the purpose of schooling as well: “Positive education challenges the current paradigm of education, which values academic attainment above all other goals. Drawing on classical ideas, we believe that the DNA of education is a double helix with intertwined strands of equal importance: academics; character and well-being” (“Our Manifesto”). The past decade has brought a surging interest in the connection between education and well-being, and with positive psychology’s steady growth and applicability, teaching happiness and well-being has become increasingly visible and viable via its offshoot, positive education.

The rationale for bringing well-being to schools feeds on widespread notions that education is in crisis. Students are underprepared, teachers are underqualified, infrastructure is crumbling, funding is dwindling, retention and graduation rates are dismal, and even when they are not, job prospects are dire; in short, the educational system is failing. There are variations of this argument, but they usually echo the shift towards neoliberal values and austerity measures over the last decade (Welch and Scott 2016). Positive educators address these external challenges—many of them grounded in material and financial issues—by turning inwards and focusing on individual strengths, character, and well-being. Not surprisingly, in a time when budgets, resources, and academic freedom are increasingly eroded, this emphasis on personal responsibility and success via individual emotions has gained considerable traction. The claim that academic engagement and success can be increased without infrastructure investment or additional financial commitments is a seductive one, but this focus on personal emotions obscures external, structural problems and transfers responsibility to the individual. In a very real way, then, the struggle

against positive psychology and positive education is also the struggle against austerity, contingency, and the mandate to do more with less. Positive psychologists and positive educators, however, do not embrace this narrative; instead, they position their interventions as a welcome return to democratic and civic education, a reemphasis on moral and character development, and a commitment to student-centered education. Interestingly, well-being advocates employ much of the same rhetoric—against consumerism and the commodification of higher education, against vocationalism, against standardization—as those educators who work for diversity, alternatives to the status quo, critical engagement with the world, and social justice.

Although positive psychologists claim their applied research serves the public good and is socially transformative, the field's core principles and accompanying values suggest otherwise. Though it claims ultimate goals of positive relationships and community, positive psychology privileges predictable and manageable well-being literacy on an individual level. Its pedagogy centers on identifying, nurturing, and activating individual strengths for increased well-being. The core driver of positive education is the Values in Action (VIA) Classification, which “provides the common language and lens for understanding who we are—at good times and bad - and what it means to thrive” (Linkins et al. 66).<sup>[2]</sup> Each of the VIA's 24 strengths is assessed by the VIA Survey to determine an individual's strength profile based on five signature strengths, and each has outcomes associated with it.<sup>[3]</sup> Thus far, the “positive education revolution” (Yeager, Fisher, and Shearon xvi) has occurred primarily at the micro level, changing individuals through this strengths-based curriculum. It traffics heavily in instrumentalization, using both activities and people transactionally to increase personal well-being, and does not articulate a clear vision for meeting its goals in conversation with larger social contexts. The preoccupation with the individual in positive education often obscures cultural, political, social, economic, and ethical issues, as well as undermines students' understanding of their place in a broader community, beyond their individual needs and individual strengths. Well-being education seeks to create equal opportunity, but its emphasis on the individual instead of infrastructure shifts attention away from classroom dynamics, teacher-student relationships, institutional contexts, and larger structural concerns that may be riddled with inequity. Though touted as a democratizing force that levels the playing field, it places the burden of improvement upon individual students rather than the systems in which they live and learn. This return to character development and values education raises important questions about the role and reach of well-being education.

Though inextricably bound to particular values and perspectives, positive education attempts to skirt its political and ethical implications by focusing on individual strengths, student-centered curricula, and a commitment to nurturing what is universally *positive*. Positive psychology and the strengths it promotes form the basis for a character education that aims to transcend partisan politics: “Instead of viewing character as a fixed and narrowly defined construct, character is seen as multifaceted, dynamic, idiosyncratic, and unique to the individual. Rather than prescribing a particular recipe for positive character, this approach provides a language for describing (and calling forth) each individual's character-related dispositions and capacities” (Linkins et al. 65). Positive psychology is simultaneously driven by a hyper-focus on the individual (and its specific capabilities, needs, and desires) and an allegiance to what it identifies as timeless, universal values. Despite positive psychology and positive education's claims of ideological neutrality, schooling, pedagogy, curricula, and subject matter are never neutral. This is particularly so with content as fraught as subjective well-being and emotions. Since positive psychology frameworks suffer from semantic slipperiness, defaulting to the contested, ambiguous, subjective term *positive* to signify their version of well-being, there are additional complications for curriculum development, learning objectives, outcomes, assessment, and pedagogy, which require a clear definition of terms, goals, and values. The presumed universality and benefits of teaching well-being are often taken for granted, creating far-reaching, consequential, and potentially problematic applications.<sup>[4]</sup>

Positive psychologists sidestep some of these issues through the rhetoric of empiricism and science as well as associated claims of objective and merely descriptive accounts of well-being and flourishing. Positive education, too, refers back to empiricism and science for its curricula, assessment, and pedagogy. IPEN reiterates this grounding: “We are deeply committed to the proper use of scientific inquiry and evaluation to support the case for positive education, and our public advocacy will be founded on evidence of what works” (“Our Manifesto”). Relying on the rigor and supremacy of scientific methods, positive education employs one of positive psychology's touchstones and most misleading rhetorical strategies, and claims a pedagogy based on objective facts, not strengths that may be dispositional and culturally determined. This stance preempts necessary conversations about whether teaching well-being has a place in contexts such as public schools and belies positive psychology's political bent, which skews conservative. It also suggests that there is a “right” way to exemplify and achieve well-being, establishing a standard for flourishing and norms against which students, teachers, and schools are taught and then evaluated. Though focusing almost exclusively on strengths, it endorses and enacts pedagogies of remediation with its version of flourishing as both desirable and ideal.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially for those of us committed to alternatives, positive psychology as a whole encourages satisfaction with and acclimation to the way things are rather than the imagining of new possibilities.

Although positive education is a recent development, most of its materials focus on implementation and dissemination, written as if the desirability and benefits of positive education were self-evident and unassailable. In its current application, positive education runs the risk of becoming a form of “banking education,” instrumentally filling students with positive affect (i.e., making them personally happy so they can be economically and socially useful) and “serv[ing] the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (Freire 73). While positive education posits both the malleability and teachability of well-being, it does so—much like self-help and positive psychology—by bracketing economy, ideology, and politics. Positive education therefore fails to facilitate social reform, mitigate inequality, or intervene in the material conditions of students’ existence. Importantly, it also does not assist teachers and students in achieving the Freirean goals of “conscientization” (critical consciousness), humanization, dialogism, or “reading the word and the world.”

These critiques notwithstanding, positive psychologists claim tangible and beneficial impact on individuals, communities, institutions, and society. This fuels an activist agenda, shorthanded as PERMA 51, or “the long mission of positive psychology”: “By the year 2051, 51 percent of the people of the world will be flourishing” (*Flourish* 240). Crucially, proponents argue, this mission “will be aided by positive education, in which teachers embed the principles of well-being into what they teach, and the depression and anxiety of their students drop and their students’ happiness rises” (240). Positive education, then, is explicitly conceptualized and applied as a conduit for spreading well-being as endorsed by positive psychologists. Classrooms and schools become extensions of the positive psychology project, labs for its research, and incubators for its worldview. The primary purpose of IPEN showcases this commitment: “We aim to persuade policymakers to change their policy frameworks so that practitioners are encouraged to educate for character and well-being alongside delivering rigorous and stretching academic study” (“Our Manifesto”). In the interest of public good, K-12 and higher education institutions are to be reshaped by positive psychology values and methods, becoming “positive institutions.”

Providing students with more emotional resources is a potentially useful complement to other investments in education. Similarly, well-being may be a desirable educational outcome, in certain contexts and manifestations. However, there needs to be more dialogue about the methods and aims of positive psychology’s version of happiness. Positive psychology and its application, positive education, afford an opportunity to revisit why and what we teach, but by already assuming that well-being is the primary goal, they preempt the useful and necessary consideration of other educational aims.<sup>[5]</sup> As educators, we should pose the following crucial questions: Is flourishing a desired educational aim and outcome? Is it teachable? Assessable? If so, how do we scaffold it, and what would a productive pedagogy about and for well-being look like? What are its methods and tools? How do we ensure these curricula do not become proprietary? How might positive education connect to other educational initiatives, such as high-stakes testing, performance pay, government mandates, and austerity measures? How is positive education a form of remediation? A normalized and normalizing discourse? In whose interest are these curricula? In short, we must ask whose version of happiness is brought to our students, our classrooms, and our institutions, and what its implications are for the work we do as educators and scholars.

## Composing Happiness: Intersections between Writing Studies and Well-Being

Some of the potential consequences positive psychology has for K-12 and higher education may seep into writing studies because of its porous and interdisciplinary nature. In her historical work *Composition in the University*, Sharon Crowley argues that “first-year composition has been remarkably vulnerable to ideologies and practices that originate elsewhere than in its classroom” (6). She views freshman composition as a site where incoming students are domesticated and acculturated to academic existence and expectations. The writing classroom is “the institutional site wherein student subjectivity is to be monitored and disciplined. ... The course is meant to shape students to behave, think, write, and speak as students rather than as the people they are, people who have differing histories and traditions and languages and ideologies” (8-9). Positive education’s emphasis on soft skills and well-being aligns particularly well with these normalizing tendencies, teaching students how to manage their emotions, expectations, and engagement for greater well-being and success in college and beyond. FYW courses are often gateway courses and serve double-duty by acclimating students to what it means to be a college student. Composition courses, curricula, and pedagogies routinely serve other interests by forming the foundation of learning communities, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) initiatives. These roles dovetail with positive psychology’s self-proclaimed general appeal, as well as its desire to integrate well-being into the curriculum more broadly.

Writing studies historically has drawn on psychological research and insight, so it is not difficult to imagine intersections with positive psychology and positive education. In fact, there are a number of shared concepts and applications among positive psychology, positive education, and writing studies. Writing studies teachers and scholars theorize emotions’ central role in producing the writer, writing teacher, writing process, rhetorical



frameworks, motivation and engagement, and feedback systems. Often, the focus is on understanding and minimizing, or at least managing, negative emotions that can hinder good writing (especially those related to testing, performance, and evaluation, such as guilt, shame, inadequacy, frustration, anxiety, stress, and anger).<sup>[6]</sup> Positive psychology and positive education's strengths-based approach with its emphasis of the positive (its "broaden and build" focus) aligns with aspects of good composition pedagogy, especially in response to student writing. When providing student feedback, best practices include beginning with identifying what the writer has done well—essentially, a focus on strengths—before moving to suggest areas for improvement. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, or optimal experience, bears resemblance to the state that writing faculty try to engender with freewriting. Additionally, many of the character strengths identified in the VIA classification overlap with the eight habits of mind as identified by the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. For example, "curiosity" and "creativity" are explicitly named in both classifications, while "persistence" in the *Framework* overlaps with the VIA strength of *perseverance* (as well as with the notion of *grit* more broadly).<sup>[7]</sup>

In much the same way that dominant ideologies and educational trends leak into FYW, so too do outside methods, intellectual trends, and concepts find their way into the theory and practice of writing studies. Positive psychology and positive education's commitment to scientific validity, empiricism, and objectivity aligns with the drive in writing studies (and education more broadly) towards competencies, demonstrable outcomes, assessment, and data-driven approaches to teaching and learning. Within these frameworks, individual emotions can also be quantified and operationalized to suit administrative or institutional needs. Positive psychology and positive education also revisit and revise long-established connections between writing and well-being, especially expressive writing, personal writing, journaling, and diary writing (Lepore and Smyth). Another form of writing for well-being exists in therapeutic contexts (Bishop), and writing to heal is premised, just as positive psychology is, on the positive aspects of flourishing and on the clinical goals of preventing and addressing mental health issues. The success of positive psychology, with its focus on flourishing rather than what it labels emotional remediation, may also alter the therapeutic stigma of emotions in education (though its definition of flourishing may further marginalize those who do not conform to its particular version of well-being). Finally, there are important connections between mindfulness and positive psychology, happiness, flourishing, and well-being. Our field's enthusiastic uptake of contemplative practices and approaches may bring some of positive psychology's ideological inflections to writing studies through the back door, and we should be especially mindful of this potential influence as we continue to explore the benefits and possibilities of this work.

Although their curricula and pedagogy are steeped in activities centered on composing, positive psychology and positive education advocates rarely identify or capitalize on the movements' reliance on writing and sound composition pedagogy. A primary example of composing in positive psychology curricula is the reflective writing centered on individual character strengths, but there are other core compositional components: recording and reflecting on mindful moments, keeping gratitude journals, diary writing, writing letters to others, and constructing intentions and motivational mantras. Writing processes and practices along with the potentially transformative power of composing in happiness pedagogies are often unacknowledged and underdeveloped. When writing as a means of well-being is discussed in positive psychology and positive education, it is typically treated instrumentally: activities are provided so that the writer may bring more well-being to herself. Writing is seen more as a tool to produce happy content and pleasurable affect for the self rather than as means of new knowledge production in the service of the larger community. In short, these positive psychology composing efforts focus more on the writer and the product she produces than on writing as process and possibility.

A closer look at the rhetoric and practice of positive education, however, suggests that, in addition to what you teach, how you teach matters. Unfortunately, this valuing of pedagogy is overshadowed when positive psychologists attribute their students' increased engagement with learning (and their own newfound gratification with teaching) to the groundbreaking content of positive psychology. In his 2004 article "Can Happiness Be Taught?" Seligman attributes positive psychology's appeal in education to its content, claiming that his positive psychology course "differs, however, in an important way" from other courses that he has taught over four decades. Seligman reports high engagement and "mature intellectual performance" (86) from students in his positive psychology course, yet he merely credits the content for this marked improvement: "All in all, teaching *this subject* has been the most gratifying teaching I have done in my forty years as an instructor" (86; emphasis added).

An alternative reading is that students are learning differently in this positive psychology course and are responding differently (to the teacher, the material, and their experiences) because they are being taught differently. Seligman's other examples suggest that his reported success in this course may be more about pedagogy than content. His description of the course, in essence, reveals the integration of high-impact educational practices, such as experiential learning and various writing assignments: "there is real-world homework exercise to do and write up every week"; "[t]he workload is heavy: two essays per week, one on the extensive readings and the other on homework exercises" (81). The inclusion of a number of writing assignments in his course and the decision to have

students engage in, reflect on, and enact the material rather than simply memorize and parrot back its content is reminiscent of what one might find in a writing class, writing center, or writing workshop. As writing teachers, we regularly teach and ask students to enact skills, not just to absorb them. We engage in praxis, combining theory and practice. His emphasis on the importance of the students listening to one another as well as sharing in class (81) reflect the ethos of the student-centered writing classroom, which works to decenter the “sage on the stage” and makes room for students’ individual voices as well as group discussion and peer-to-peer collaboration. Furthermore, Seligman’s shift from an emphasis on lecturing *at* to listening *to* echoes precisely what Peter Elbow calls playing the “believing game.” For Elbow, “It’s the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them, but actually trying to believe them. We can use the tool of believing to scrutinize not for flaws but to find hidden virtues in ideas that are unfashionable or repellent” (16). Elbow’s notion of the “believing game” has much overlap with positive psychology’s prime directive of identifying and nurturing individual strengths rather than weaknesses. Consider Seligman’s statement, which affirms this connection: “The listening skills taught in traditional clinical psychology center around detecting hidden, underlying troubles, but here I encourage the opposite: listening for underlying positive motivations, strengths, and virtues” (81). Though often overlooked in positive psychology, it is clear that pedagogy, student-teacher relationships, writing, process, scaffolding, and reflection matter immensely.

Positive psychologists’ attempts to intervene in the purpose and pedagogy of education make it worthy of our attention, but it is also worth noting that writing studies might intervene in the research and practice of positive psychology and positive education. Writing scholars and teachers have engaged the role of emotions in teaching and learning over the past few decades (Brand and Graves; McLeod; Worsham; Jacobs; Richmond; Jacobs and Micciche; Chandler; Micciche; Wenger; Stenberg *Repurposing*, “Teaching”). This interest in emotions mirrors the broader shift within academia toward treating affect and emotions as serious objects of inquiry. An associated trend is the promotion of embodied and contemplative practices in writing pedagogy and scholarship, including mindfulness, meditation, breathing exercises, and yoga (Wenger; Writing and Mindfulness Network; Contemplative Pedagogies Special Interest Group (SIG)). These practices aim to assist teachers and students in coping with stressors associated with the writing process and academic settings more generally, and they may contribute to better writing and writing habits. Our recent uptick in interest in emotion and affect is shared across multiple disciplines and is indebted to the influence of feminism, affect theory, neuroscience, psychology (e.g., intrinsic motivation, Csikszentmihalyi’s *flow*, Goleman’s *emotional intelligence*, Dweck’s *growth mindset*, and Eastern philosophy and practices). Collectively, this work contradicts the “lore” that emotions do not have a place in teaching and learning (“Feeling Lore” 50). These developments also have prompted critical discussions about how to educate the whole student, not just the mind but also the body and spirit, towards well-being.

When emotion is given serious and sustained attention in writing studies, it is often aligned with commitments to sound pedagogy as well as ethically and socially responsible teaching and scholarship. Whether the aim is to improve the lives of writing faculty or writing students, humanize feedback and assessment, intervene in institutional politics, or achieve social justice, emotion offers a beneficial and often transformative addition to our work. In her Afterword to *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*, Lynn Worsham argues: “It will be a shame if the new interest in emotion as a category of critical *thought* does not move us into a new orbit of social and political possibility” (163; emphasis in original). As writing teachers and scholars, we are well positioned to claim a more active role in what it means to teach well-being. We can draw on our extended personal interaction with students, intimate knowledge of their writing habits and compositions, insight into their educational plans and career goals, attention to process and reflection, and commitments to social justice as well as a humanized and humanizing education. Our field’s social turn, promotion of diversity, and critical work in areas such as feminism, disability studies, and queer studies have shed sustained light on what dominant perspectives tend to overlook. Moreover, our study of and facility with rhetoric<sup>[8]</sup> and our embracing of critical pedagogy will serve to politicize the conversations about the connections between writing and well-being.

## Future Directions

Positive education has expanded rapidly and globally through all levels of education. As positive psychologist Acacia Parks notes, “In no area of application has positive psychology flourished more, however, than in higher education. ... Educational institutions have expressed interests in using principles of positive psychology to inform institutional structure, faculty development, and pedagogy” (429). One of the earliest and highest profile cases of teaching positive psychology was the happiness course taught by Tal Ben-Shahar at Harvard University (starting in 2006) that at its height drew 1,400 students (“Positive Psychology 1504”). Today, positive psychology curricula are made freely and globally available through a number of venues, including a happiness MOOC (“The Science of Happiness”). The recent collection *Positive Psychology on the College Campus* details the ways in which positive psychology is making inroads into higher education through student affairs and how it can support pedagogical and institutional

work more broadly. New resources, curricula, and networks continue to pop up with increasing regularity. The Wellbeing in Higher Education Network (WiHEN) “promotes the exchange of ideas, collaboration and supportive relationships for practitioners applying, and researching the application of, wellbeing science, organisational and positive psychology, and positive education in tertiary and higher education environments.” While still in its initial stages (announced in July 2016), the newly formed WiHEN attests to the spread of positive psychology in higher education.

Positive psychology and positive education’s potential to revolutionize education (for better or worse) is open to question,<sup>[9]</sup> and more studies are necessary to explore how writing studies is engaging with these trends and whether doing so is worthwhile. However, over a decade ago, Seligman had already hinted at the expansion of teaching for well-being beyond positive psychology. The concluding paragraph of “Can Happiness Be Taught?” gestures at what I term a *happiness across the curriculum* initiative, in which well-being skills can be packaged up and moved from one disciplinary context to the next. Seligman states, “Teaching about the Good Life is by no means the unique province of a psychology course. ... A stance, moreover, that gives the best in life equal footing with the worst, that is as concerned with flourishing as with surviving, that is as interested in building as in repairing, should find a comfortable home in any discipline” (86-87). Positive psychologists regularly regard their curricula for well-being as templates that can be integrated into a variety of academic contexts. In their introduction to *Activities for Teaching Positive Psychology*, Jeffrey Froh and Acacia Parks echo the belief that positive psychology content is educationally transformative, and they claim it helps to enliven courses in which the “instructor is faced with conveying relatively dry content (‘nuts and bolts’ as it were)” (7), including academic writing. In their chapter, “Writing Critically about Personal Growth: A ‘Writing in the Disciplines’ Course on Happiness,” Parks and writing program director Valerie Ross describe their development of a happiness-themed WID course. There, they highlight the relevance and benefits of teaching positive psychology to a generalized student population through freshman writing seminars. In their words, “We discovered that, while any engaging topic advances the goal of teaching students to write, the topic of happiness proved beneficial in ways that transcend customary pedagogy. We believe that a sustained exploration of happiness is an ideal way to introduce students to college-level writing and to life as an adult” (93).

It is undeniable that themes such as happiness and well-being are amenable to writing courses and resonate with many students because of their broad interdisciplinary and experiential appeal. Matthew Parfitt and Dawn Skorczewski aggregate and scaffold interdisciplinary perspectives on well-being in their recent composition textbook, *Pursuing Happiness: A Bedford Spotlight Reader*. They believe that happiness forms “ideal questions to focus a writing course” (vi), that it “is a topic that inspires good writing, in part because it arouses strong interest and raises good questions” (2), and is a theme that “allows for different kinds of approaches” (3). However, positive psychology is only one of myriad perspectives the collection covers, and their approach suggests that mere content is not enough. Their goal is to help “spark productive discussion and critical engagement” (vii) and to have students “challenge their own values and beliefs as they construct their own arguments” (vii). “[L]ook for unresolved issues,” they urge students, “the open questions, the still unknown. Look for the remaining gaps in our understanding of happiness. Think big: consider the problem of happiness not only as it relates to you personally but also as it relates to others ... expand your horizons” (3). I, too, have sought to critically engage emotions, happiness, well-being, and positive psychology with my FYW students (Belli, “The Composition of Happiness”; Belli, “Learning Community Happiness Archive”). At the heart of my pedagogy is a commitment to critical literacy, in these courses served through analyzing and complicating the rhetoric and ideology of happiness. To that end, I have designed the “happiness archive” assignment, a semester-long blogging project drawing on Sara Ahmed’s notion of an ethnography of happiness in *The Promise of Happiness*. Students examine how “happiness shapes what coheres as a world” (2); they “follow the word *happiness* around” and “notice what it is up to, where it goes, who or what it gets associated with” (14). In doing so, they make claims, provide evidence, and form arguments about “not only what makes happiness good but how happiness *participates* in making things good” (13; emphasis in original). These examples, along with the “emotional literacy” assignments in this special issue, trace just a few paths of this subject matter’s inroads into writing studies.

Integrating a focus on happiness into writing studies and incorporating more writing into positive psychology and positive education may prove worthwhile, but our field has a larger role to play in this and associated conversations. We must ask, how might the potential overlap between writing and well-being—both with an interest in pedagogy and broad interdisciplinary appeal—be understood and utilized? How might we shift the conversations about emotions and well-being in education to help students move beyond individual flourishing and to imagine new possibilities through writing? Since there is a strong link between writing and increased well-being, what can writing studies, with its deep knowledge of writing and its focus on pedagogy, contribute to the discussion of well-being in education?

One answer is that, as writing teachers and scholars, we are highly attuned to and appreciative of the ways in which writing facilitates knowledge, to how writing *is* knowing. But we also write to know what we don’t know, to come to



know what we didn't know before. We write not only to practice or rehearse, to strengthen individual characteristics and resilience, but also to grow and explore and change. We write when we are unhappy, we write for critique, we write to expand the dialogue on issues important to us. Well-being writing exercises could therefore be repurposed, turned away from a formulaic, inward-looking agenda, and leveraged towards curricula that instead encourage revision, recursiveness, play, risk, failure, and critical engagement with the world. Like Shari Stenberg's notion of "feminist repurposing," writing for well-being would necessarily entail "discovery of new possibility" (*Repurposing Composition* 62). Writing for well-being could, and should, prompt critical, questioning hope that produces alternative forms and futures rather than conservative, self-satisfying techniques that merely reinforce and reproduce the status quo. We must teach not only to change the individual but also to change the world, a provocation that positive education shares, though with different intent and consequences.

Positive psychology and positive education have prompted sustained attention to emotions, engagement, and well-being in higher education, and may have potentially beneficial effects on students, teachers, and institutions. However, just as the language we privilege in the composition classroom carries certain conceptions of power, privilege, and politics, so too do the emotions we normalize and nurture. When we claim specific emotions as contributing to better writing or learning, we are implicitly stating that these have more value, because they contribute to things that we value, including greater academic achievement. The influential *Students' Right to Their Own Language* resolution stems from a desire to acknowledge and value a variety of linguistic variants in the language and writing of our students. As the diversity of acceptable emotional expression is constrained further and further by pervasive influences such as positive psychology, will it one day be necessary to affirm students' right to their own emotions? Positive education claims mere description of timeless values that contribute to the good life, but it both teaches well-being as something we ought to do and promotes its version of strengths and well-being as the desirable standard of flourishing. In doing so, it introduces a host of ideological and ethical commitments to the work we do as educators and scholars; even while invisible, these commitments may challenge and even undermine our professional and personal beliefs.

This article highlights an under-acknowledged influence on the recent turn toward emotions, happiness, and well-being in higher education generally and in writing studies specifically. While they are merely two of myriad influences driving the surging interest in emotions in the academy, positive psychology and positive education serve as primary generators of the research and rhetoric of emotions in popular and educational discourses. As such, they deserve our sustained attention, and they act as both an opportunity and a challenge: any instructor considering what it means to educate the whole student will need to confront their version of teaching well-being. It remains to be seen how much positive psychology, positive education, and related movements will influence the theoretical and practical work of writing studies going forward. However, to the extent that we do interact with these movements, we stand to influence this new research and pedagogy on well-being and on writing's role in it, not just slot our work into the positive education paradigm as it currently exists. Worsham's call to action nearly two decades ago still remains relevant: "our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of emotion" ("Going Postal" 216).

Whether we agree with their assumptions and applications, whether we are even conscious of their influence, positive psychology and positive education inform the climate in which our classrooms, institutions, and scholarship are embedded. So far, mainstream and academic reactions to positive psychology and positive education have been kneejerk and have tended towards extremes: either folks are jumping on the well-being bandwagon or forcefully (and sometimes reductively) critiquing the happiness industry. In my assessment, both approaches are misguided because, by either holding well-being so close or pushing it away so forcefully, they miss a crucial opportunity for engagement. We should not ignore or embrace but engage in order to give writing studies a seat at the well-being table. We should participate in the conversations that are occurring globally about the role and trajectory of well-being in educational settings and specifically the place of writing within these initiatives. Positive psychologists and positive educators have largely dominated this discussion, not only because they command a disproportionate share of mainstream media attention and funding but also because their many proponents and practitioners actively work to get their views and voices into circulation. Achieving this relevance, relatability, and broad appeal is something that our field continues to grapple with as we contemplate and promote the "public turn" in composition and the relevancy of the humanities and academia more broadly. Articulating a compelling counter-narrative to positive psychology and positive education's views on writing, pedagogy, and well-being is—besides an ethical and educational imperative—an important means of making our work legible, visible, and meaningful to a wider audience. I welcome the start of many rich and productive conversations about the intimate connection between writing and well-being in our field, in positive psychology and positive education, and beyond.

## Notes



1. Exceptions include Briefs-Elgin, who explores the use of *flow* in writing pedagogy and process; Stenberg ("Teaching and (Re)Learning"), who offers a critical discussion of the emotional intelligence movement; Gross and Alexander, who critically explore the positive psychology contexts of the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*; and Campbell, who presents an emotional literacy assignment that engages positive psychology for improving writing students' mental health. ([Return to text.](#))
2. Positive education fundamentals also include resiliency, grit, mindfulness, positive psychology exercises such as gratitude letters and what-went-well reflections, well-being quizzes, questionnaires and assessments (used also to collect research data for positive psychologists), and practical guides serving as professional development for teachers, coaches, and administrators. See Froh and Parks for examples of teaching positive psychology. ([Return to text.](#))
3. For an overview of the 24 strengths, see Peterson and Seligman; Values in Action Institute on Character. For an overview of positive psychology and its focus on strengths, see *Flourish*; Magyar-Moe. ([Return to text.](#))
4. One example is the United States Army initiative Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF)—since renamed and rebranded as Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness (CSF2) and Ready and Resilient (R2)—in which an educational resiliency program for adolescents was translated to a military context (Seligman and Matthews). ([Return to text.](#))
5. See J. White for a rich, philosophical treatment of well-being and education. ([Return to text.](#))
6. See Driscoll and Powell for a discussion of managing emotions during the writing process. ([Return to text.](#))
7. See Gross and Alexander for a critical discussion of the *Framework*, positive psychology, and success. ([Return to text.](#))
8. See Frawley for an extended treatment of the rhetoric of positive psychology. ([Return to text.](#))
9. See M. White for an exploration of the impact of positive education. See Pawleski for a discussion of the humanities and positive education. ([Return to text.](#))

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